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ABSTRACT

A study in Columbia, Missouri, revealed that many teacher and student background characteristics correlated weakly but significantly with teachers' perceptions of the frequency of discipline infractions and the effectiveness of disciplinary techniques. The data (derived from school records and from a questionnaire to which 162 elementary teachers responded) showed more experienced teachers as reporting less frequent drug use and fighting. These teachers also held less positive attitudes toward within-school suspension and corporal punishment. More educated teachers reported less bad language from students, less personal use of verbal reprimands and corporal punishment, and more personal use of talk, counseling, or parent involvement and extra assignments as disciplinary techniques. Lower student socioeconomic status (SES) and/or a lower percentage of white students in a school was associated with more frequent reportings of disruptive or violent behavior. Teachers in lower SES and/or white-percentage schools more frequently endorsed physical or verbal punishment or removal of students. Teachers in higher SES and/or white-percentage schools favored extra assignments as a disciplinary technique. Finally, grade or age of students was found to be positively associated with teacher perceptions of more verbal impertinence, failures to do homework, and truancy, and teachers of higher grades were more likely to use suspension than corporal punishment as a disciplinary technique. (KH)

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CORRELATIONS BETWEEN TEACHER AND STUDENT BACKGROUNDS AND TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS AND DISCIPLINARY TECHNIQUES

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Student discipline problems and teacher techniques for maintaining discipline are areas of concern to both schools and society in general. This concern is evident in recent Supreme Court cases (Tinker, 1969; Goss, 1975; Wood, 1975), polls of teachers by the National Education Association (NEA, 1976), and polls of the general public (Gallup and Smith, 1977). Educational psychologists have also demonstrated a concern with school discipline issues. Research into the psychology of school discipline has covered a wide variety of areas that can be grouped into three broad questions: (a) how frequently do different student disciplinary problems occur; (b) what disciplinary techniques are used most frequently and what is their perceived effectiveness; and (c) what teacher and/or student background factors (such as teaching experience or student race and age) correlate with disciplinary problems and techniques? Researchers have studied these questions using all parties concerned with school discipline as the population of interest. The studied populations include school counselors (Finnegan, 1976), parents (Gallup & Smith, 1977), principals (Kingston & Gentry, 1974), students (Lufler, 1979) and teachers (Camp & Bourn, 1979).

The present study focused on the third set of questions-the relations between teacher and student background characteristics and the teacher's perception of the frequency of discipline infractions and the effectiveness of disciplinary techniques. Of the three research questions, the background correlates of discipline problems and techniques has received the least attention. This is regrettable because this research is likely to be most illuminating with regard to the causes and cures of discipline problems. Research that simply documents the frequency of different discipline problems (like nationwide or schoolwide polls) is enlightening in that it focuses debate on issues important to schools. However, these studies cannot reveal whether certain types of students are more prone to certain types of infractions or whether teachers with varying backgrounds are more likely to meet up with one type of problem than another. Answers to these questions would be the most helpful in attempting to remove the conditions that lead to infractions in the first place. Research that assesses teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of different discipline techniques is beneficial because it provides teachers with the collective wisdom of their colleagues. However, these studies shed no light on why or under what circumstances a particular technique can be expected to work. Studies that correlate teacher and student background factors with teacher beliefs about technique effectiveness can help us answer these questions.

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Past Research on the Background Correlates of Discipline Problems and Techniques

In perhaps the earliest empirical study of background correlates of discipline problems, Wickman (1928) found that "the behavior of girls conforms more closely to the teachers' standards of acceptable conduct than the behavior of boys'" (pp. 60-61). He reported that teachers believed boys were at least twice as likely as girls to commit infractions such as tardiness, destruction of property, rudeness and defiance, among others. Wickman's results are still consistent with more current research (e.g., Feshbach, 1969).

Much more recently, Lufler (1979) asked both teachers and students about whether or not they thought students of different backgrounds received preferential treatment in their school discipline system. He found that teachers and students had quite similar views. Both groups reported that

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students who had attained a special status in school, through good grades, extracurricular activities or sports participation, got preferential treatment. Also, both groups felt that family and personal background differences, like economic status, sex, or race, were relatively unimportant. When Lufler compared these perceptions with actual punishment records, however, he found less evidence for preferential treatment based on school status than teachers and students believed. In addition, he reported that "students from poorer homes are disproportionately sent to the office for punishment" (p. 459), and that, in interviews, teachers saw lower class children as potentially more disruptive.

Lufler's (1979) finding that lower class students are more often removed from the classroom parallels earlier findings of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare (1976, 1978). These reports did not deal with perceptions but did conclude that minority and poor white students were suspended from school more often than other students and that their length of suspensions was longer.

Finally Check (1979) examined student age as a correlate of discipline problems. He found that middle school teachers reported nearly twice as many discipline problems as high school teachers. Also, no differences were reported in discipline problems dependent on the teacher's gender or whether the teacher taught in a private or public school.

With regard to discipline techniques, Check (1979) presented a detailed analysis of the use of corporal punishment. He found that (a) middle school teachers used physical punishment more frequently than any other teachers; (b) male teachers used physical punishment twice as often as female teachers; (c) teachers with Master's degrees or beyond and/or teachers with ten or more years of experience used physical punishment less often than teachers with Bachelor's degrees or with one to nine years' experience. Also, corporal punishment was twice as likely to occur in public than in private schools.

Hypotheses for the Present Study

The present study employed two teacher background and three student (or school) background characteristics as correlates of discipline problems and techniques. The correlates were as follows:

(a) Teacher's education level
(b) Teacher's experience
(c) Grade level
(d) Economic status of the students (school)
(e) Racial background of the students (school)

Open and closed-ended questions were asked of teachers concerning fifteen discipline problems and eight disciplinary techniques. It was expected that the results of studies by Lufler (1979) and Check (1979) reported above would be replicated. In addition, the present study examined many facets of school discipline that have not been included in previous investigations. The relation of responses to these questions with the background characteristics were examined in an exploratory fashion.

Method

Subjects. All teachers (grades K through 6) in all fourteen Columbia, Missouri elementary schools were eligible to participate. Of the 203 eligible teachers, 12 could not be contacted, and 29 refused to participate. One hundred sixty-two teachers, or 80% of the population, answered at least part of the questionnaire. Response rates for individual questions ranged from 80% to 60%.

One hundred fifty-one of the teachers were female and ten were male, making it impossible to examine teacher gender as a background factor. Nearly equal numbers of teachers taught at each grade level, ranging from 14 kindergarten teachers to 27 first-grade teachers. Twenty-six percent of the teachers had from one to five years of teaching experience, 36% from six to ten years, 21% from 11 to 15 years, 10% from 16 to 20 years, and 5% of the teachers had more than 20 years of teaching experience. Forty percent of the teachers reported having a Bachelor's degree, 34% reported some graduate level credit, 18% reported holding a Master's degree, and 7% reported having post-Master's level credit. No teacher held a Doctoral degree.

Procedure. All participants were contacted by phone during the months of April and May, 1982. They were told the survey concerned the "attitudes of teachers in the Columbia school system" and that all responses would be strictly confidential. If the teacher refused to participate, s/he was asked if the interviewer could call back at another time. If this question was answered negatively, the interview was terminated.

Questionnaire

Teacher Background Information. Teachers were asked (a) what grade they taught; (b) how many years of teaching experience they had; and (c) what their educational history was. Correlations between background factors were all less than $r = .20$, but two correlations deserve mention. Teachers with more education were likely to have more experience ($r = .19$, $df = 162$, $p < .02$) and tended to teach higher grades ($r = .14$, $df = 158$, $p < .08$).

Open-ended Discipline Problem Questions. Next, teachers were asked, "What is the most frequent reason for the use of discipline in your class?" The teachers' open-ended responses were written down by the telephone interviewer. When all of the interviews were completed, teachers' responses were sorted by the principal investigator into one of fifteen categories (described below in relation to the closed-ended part of the questionnaire). If the remark was not easily categorized, both the principal and co-investigator discussed its classification.

After this initial coding, each response was placed into one of four general classes of discipline problems: school work related; bad peer relations; bad teacher relations; and undifferentiated anti-social behavior (see below for groupings). Ultimately, 21% of the responses were coded as school work related, 39% as bad peer relations, 13% as bad teacher relations, and 27% as anti-social behavior.

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Closed-ended Discipline Problem Questions. After responding to the open-ended question, a list of fifteen discipline problems were read to the teachers. For each problem, teachers were asked whether the problem was "widespread", "present, but not frequent", "rare", or "never occurred" in their class or school. The first seven problems related to the teachers' own classrooms and the remaining eight problems related to their school in general. The fifteen problems were:

1. Verbal impertinence or discourteousness toward the teacher (teacher relations)
2. Throwing objects (anti-social behavior)
3. Failure to do homework or other assignments (school work)
4. Cheating (school work)
5. Physical violence against the teacher (teacher relations)
6. Using profane and obscene language (anti-social behavior)
7. Destruction of school property (anti-social behavior)
8. Fighting (anti-social behavior)
9. Truancy (anti-social behavior)
10. Physical violence against teachers other than yourself (teacher relations)
11. Smoking in the building (anti-social behavior)
12. Use of drugs (anti-social behavior)
13. Gang fighting (peer relations)
14. Carrying dangerous weapons (anti-social behavior)
15. Stealing (anti-social behavior).

The classification of each problem into each of the four general types (used for the open-ended question) is given in parentheses.

Open-ended Disciplinary Technique Question. Teachers were next asked, "What is the most frequent disciplinary technique you use in your class?" Open-ended responses were categorized using a procedure similar to that described above. This time, however, the eight disciplinary techniques discussed below were the initial categories. After the initial sorting, three general classes of disciplinary techniques were distinguished: verbal, nonverbal or physical reprimand; restrictions on activities; and talk, counseling, or parent involvement. Reprimands accounted for 30% of the responses, restrictions on activities accounted for 47% of responses, and talk, counseling, or parent involvement accounted for 23% of responses.

Closed-ended Disciplinary Technique Questions. Eight disciplinary techniques were then read to the teachers who were asked to answer three questions about each. These were: (a) "How often does the technique work?" (always/often/sometimes/never); (b) " How often have you used (form of discipline) in the last year?"; (c) "When (form of discipline) is used, does it do more harm or more good?". The eight disciplinary techniques were:

1. Extra assignments (restriction)
2. Within-school suspension (restriction)
3. Notes written to parents (talk)
4. Verbal reprimands (reprimand)
5. Corporal punishment (reprimand)
6. Suspension from school (restriction)
7. Detention after school hours (restriction)
8. Restrictions from extracurricular activities (restriction)

The classification of each disciplinary technique into each of the three general types (used for open-ended responses) is given in parentheses.

Open-ended Problems Facing Schools Question. Finally, each teacher was asked, "What is the biggest problem facing the public schools in this community?" Seventy-two percent of the responses were coded into one of the following four categories:

1. Lack of discipline (16%)
2. Lack of financial support (26%)
3. Parents' lack of interest (21%)
4. Size of school/classes (9%)

All teacher responses were then recoded into one of three general categories: parent apathy (27%); lack of societal support (41%); and lack of student discipline (32%).

Student Characteristics

Using information provided by the central school administration, a socioeconomic status (SES) rating and an "ethnicity" rating were created for each school. For the SES rating, the number of children in the school who were not eligible for Title I support was divided by the total number of children in the school. Thus, schools with higher percentages served children from higher SES families. For the "ethnicity" rating, the total number of children in a school classified as from a white racial group was divided by the total number of children attending the school regardless of race. Thus, schools with higher scores (percentages) served a larger percentage of white families. In all cases, the large majority of nonwhite children in any school were Afro-Americans. While these measures only gave rough estimates of the SES and race of students that a particular teacher encountered, it would not have been feasible to collect data from each teacher on the separate students they taught.

The SES and "ethnicity" ratings were very highly correlated ($r = .72$, $df = 155$, $p < .0001$).

Results

Open-ended Discipline Problems Question. To examine the impact of the five teacher and student background characteristics on the teachers' responses to the open-ended question, "What is the most frequent reason for discipline in your class?", five, two-way chi-square analyses were performed (SAS, 1979). In each analysis, one factor was the four general classes of discipline problems described above. The other factor was either (a) Two levels of grade taught (K through 3, or 4 through 6); (b) Three levels of teaching

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experience (1 through 5 years, 6 through 10 years or more); (c) Three levels of education (BA, BA plus graduate coursework, MA or more); (d) Two levels of student SES (high or low, based on a median split); or (e) Two levels of the percentage of white students in the school (high or low, based on a median split).

The chi-square analyses revealed that none of the background factors significantly related to the teachers' open-ended choices of the most frequent disciplinary problems.

Closed-ended Discipline Problems Questions. For closed-ended responses, all variables were left in their linear form and correlated with one another.

The correlations revealed that teachers who taught higher grades reported more frequent verbal impertinence from students ($r = .15$, $df = 158$, $p < .054$), more frequent failures to do homework ($r = .38$, $df = 156$, $p < .0001$), and tended to report more frequent truancy ($r = .14$, $df = 158$, $p < .08$). Teachers with more experience reported less frequent use of drugs ($r = -.18$, $df = 160$, $p < .02$) and tended to report less frequent fighting ($r = -.13$, $df = 161$, $p < .105$). Teachers with more education reported less use of bad language ($r = -.15$, $df = 162$. $p < .057$).

With regard to the students' background, many discipline problems were associated with both socioeconomic status and percentage of white students in the school. Teachers in higher SES schools reported less fighting ($r = -.24$, $df = 161$, $p < .002$), less truancy ($r = -.22$, $df = 161$, $p < .006$), less carrying of weapons ($r = -.22$, $df = 160$, $p < .006$), less stealing ($r = -.20$, $df = 160$, $p < .02$), less use of drugs ($r = -.20$, $df = 160$, $p < .02$) and tended to report less gang fighting ($r = -.13$, $df = 160$, $p < .092$). Teachers in schools serving a higher percentage of white students reported less violence against themselves ($r = -.17$, $df = 155$, $p < .04$), less destruction of property ($r = -.18$, $df = 155$, $p < .03$), less stealing ($r = -.26$, $df = 254$, $p < .002$), less fighting ($r = -.27$, $df = 155$, $p < .0006$), and less truancy ($r = -.29$, $df = 155$, $p < .0003$), and tended to report less gang fighting ($r = -.13$, $df = 154$, $p < .10$) and less carrying of weapons ($r = -.15$. $df = 154$. $p < .07$).

Open-ended Disciplinary Technique Question. Five, two-way chi-square analyses were conducted on the responses to the question, "What is the most frequent disciplinary technique used in your class?" The three general classes of discipline (restrictions on activity, reprimand and talk, counseling, or parent involvement) formed the other factor.

The most frequent disciplinary technique used by a teacher proved significantly related to the teacher's educational background ($X2 = 12.78$, $df = 4$, $p < .013$). The majority of this effect could be attributed to four cells in the contingency table. Teachers holding a Bachelor's degree reported using less reprimands less frequently than expected (cell $X2 = 3.0$) and restrictions on activities more frequently than expected (cell $X2 = 3.0$). Teachers with coursework beyond the Bachelor's degree but without a Master's degree cited restrictions on activities as their first form of discipline less frequently than expected (cell $X2 = 2.5$) and talk or counseling more frequently than expected (cell $X2 = 1.4$).

Closed-ended Disciplinary Technique Questions. Correlations were computed between each of the five background characteristics and each of the three questions asked about the eight disciplinary techniques (i.e. how well does it work, how often do you use it, and does it do more harm or more good).

Teachers who taught higher grades reported less frequent use of corporal punishment ($r = -.19$, $df = 144$, $p < .02$) and tended to report more frequent suspension from school ($r = 0.14$, $df = 132$, $p < .10$). Teachers with more experience tended to report less use of within-school suspension ($r = -0.14$, $df = 140$, $p < .10$) and less corporal punishment ($r = -0.14$, $df = 147$, $p < .10$). Teachers with more experience also more often thought corporal punishment did more harm than good ($r = -.18$, $df = 123$, $p < .044$). Finally, teachers with more education reported less frequent use of verbal reprimands ($r = -.18$, $df = 160$, $p < .03$) and tended to report using more extra assignments ($r = .16$, $df = 131$, $p < .063$) and less corporal punishment ($r = -.14$, $df = 147$, $p < .09$).

Table 1 presents the correlations between the two student characteristics and the questions about disciplinary techniques. Many of these correlations were statistically significant, but were rather low in terms of indicating strong relationships. Teachers in higher SES schools thought within-school suspensions, suspensions from school, and restrictions from extracurricular activities did not work as well as did teachers in lower SES schools. Teachers in higher SES schools also reported less frequent use of within-school suspension, verbal reprimand, corporal punishment and suspension from school, but more frequent use of extra assignments and detention after school. Finally, teachers in higher SES schools were more likely to say that within-school suspension and restriction from extracurricular activities did more harm than good.

The percentage of white students in a school was positively associated with teachers' beliefs that extra assignments worked and that notes to parents did not work. Teachers in schools serving a higher percentage of whites were also more likely to report using extra assignments and less likely to report using suspension from school. Finally, teachers in schools serving a higher percentage of whites were more likely to say verbal reprimands did more good than harm and to say corporal punishment and restriction from extracurricular activities did more harm than good.

Open-ended Problems Facing Schools Question. Again, five, two-way chi-square analyses were performed, this time using the four general categories of problems as one factor (lack of discipline, lack of financial support, parents' lack of interest, size of schools/classes) and teacher or student background as the other factor. First, the grade the teacher taught was significantly associated with the teacher's citation of the major problem facing schools ($X2 = 7.81$, $df = 2$, $p < .02$). Teachers who taught grades K through 3 were more likely than expected to say lack of societal support was the major problem (cell $X2 = 1.6$) and less likely than expected to cite student discipline (cell $X2 = 1.9$). Teachers in upper grades (4 through 6) were more likely than expected to cite student discipline (cell $X2 = 2.3$) and less likely to cite societal support (cell $X2 = 2.0$). Second,

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Table 1

Relation of student background to teacher beliefs about and use of eight forms of discipline

	Socioeconomic Status			Percentage of Whites		
Form of discipline	How well it works	Frequency of use	More good than harm	How well it works	Frequency of use	More good than harm
Extra assignments	.12	.19**	-.02	.17**	.16*	-.04
Within-school suspension	-.14*	-.15*	-.18**	-.03	-.11	-.10
Notes to parents	-.07	.05	-.02	-.14*	.00	.01
Verbal reprimand	.04	-.14*	.06	.10	-.04	.15*
Corporal punishment	-.05	-.17**	-.12	-.13	-.12	-.15*
Suspension from school	-.15*	-.24***	-.12	-.13	-.32***	-.05
Detention after school	.01	.14*	-.08	.04	.11	-.02
Restrict extra activities	-.19**	-.07	-.26***	-.11	-.06	-.21**

Notes. * $p < .10$
** $p < .05$
*** $p < .01$

1. More good than harm was coded 1, more harm than good was coded 0.
2. Degrees of freedom range from 113 to 160.

teachers in higher SES schools were less likely than expected to cite parent apathy as the major problem (cell $\chi^2 = 1.6$) while teachers in lower SES schools were more likely than expected to cite parent apathy (cell $\chi = 2.3$; overall $\chi^2 = 5.46$, $p < .066$).

Discussion

This study revealed many teacher and student background factors correlated weakly but significantly with teacher perceptions of discipline problems and the effectiveness of disciplinary techniques. More experienced teachers reported that student drug use and fighting were less frequent. These teachers also held less positive attitudes toward within-school suspension and corporal punishment as disciplinary techniques. More educated teachers reported less bad language from students, less personal use of verbal reprimands and corporal punishment and more personal use of talk, counseling, or parent involvement and extra assignments as disciplinary techniques.

With regard to student social class and racial background, a general conclusion from the results could be that lower student SES and/or a lower percentage of white students in the school was associated with teachers' reporting more frequent disruptive or violent forms of misbehavior. Teachers in lower SES and/or white-percentage schools also more frequently endorsed physical or verbal punishment or removal of the student from the situation, while teachers in higher SES and/or white-percentage schools tended to favor extra assignments as a disciplinary technique.

Finally, the grade or age of students was found to be positively associated with teacher perceptions of more verbal impertinence, failures to do homework, and truancy. Teachers of higher grades were more reluctant to use corporal punishment and more likely to use suspension from school as disciplinary techniques.

Relations to Past Research

The results of this study generally replicate and extend past findings. For instance, Check's (1979) finding that a teacher's experience and education was negatively related to the use of corporal punishment was reconfirmed. This study

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also suggests that more experienced and educated teachers do not use corporal punishment frequently because they do not think it works very often.

Lufler's (1979) finding that lower class students are viewed as more disruptive was also replicated, as were the HEW Department (1976, 1978) findings that minority and poor students are more often suspended from school. In fact, this study found a general tendency among teachers from lower SES and/or white-percentage schools to more often use disciplinary techniques that remove the offending student from the situation.

Causes and Cures

The fact that the education and experience of teachers was negatively related to the frequency with which certain discipline problems (drug use, fighting and bad language) occurred seems to indicate that knowledge of discipline problems can sometimes translate into "preventative medicine." However, this ability to prevent problems was not general across all forms of misbehavior. Also, at least one negative correlate of teaching experience, namely drug use, would seem to be more a function of experienced teachers being less aware of the problem than a function of experienced teachers actually being able to prevent it, at least on an individual student-to-teacher basis.

Teaching experience and education had a clearer and stronger relation to perceptions about disciplinary techniques. More experienced and educated teachers favored directly confronting students about behavior problems and apparently preferred less emotive reactions. Less experience and education led teachers to more often favor physical or verbal punishment or removal from the class. It might be that newer teachers reach a frustration level earlier than experienced teachers or that newer teachers have not yet learned how to effectively communicate with students causing problems. We can all agree, however, that direct and unemotional communication with students about problems is the preferred initial strategy and newer teachers might learn such skills from their more experienced and educated counterparts.

With regard to student background, it was found that teachers in lower SES and white-percentage schools reported more discipline problems, especially problems involving disruptive behavior. This is not surprising. One argument is that this occurs because higher SES students are probably socialized by their families in a way that is more congruent with the behavioral norms of schools. On the other hand, it may be that a self fulfilling prophecy is operating. More interesting is that the disruptive behaviors found in lower SES and white-percentage schools (e.g., fighting, stealing, carrying weapons, drug use) are remedied by teachers with techniques that are themselves violent (e.g., corporal punishment) or contain no direct attempts at resocialization (e.g., suspensions and restrictions on extracurricular activities). Our study could not reveal whether this was due to failed attempts at using more communicative disciplinary techniques or if teachers simply believe one must "fight fire with fire."

Needed Research

Several directions for future research have been suggested by the data. First, it appears clear that advances in the area of discipline will require experimental manipulation of discipline techniques. For several disciplinary remedies, like corporal punishment and suspensions, experimental manipulation will be unethical. With other techniques, however, it is important for researchers to now ask teachers to systematically apply them to different problems. This way we can discover which techniques work best with which type of problem.

In a less experimental vein, researchers should employ in-depth interviews with teachers to discover their underlying disciplinary strategies. How these differ between teachers who are effective and ineffective disciplinarians should be most revealing.

Finally, special attention should be paid to the discipline problems encountered by teachers of disadvantaged and minority students. These students and their teachers seem trapped in a cyclical relationship of hostility and lack of communication.

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